

Adventures of Don Quixote 1933

Directed by G. W. Pabst

Music by Jacque Ibert

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Abstract

Fifteen years ago, it took several years to track down the Video of this movie. Now it is available on DVD. This movie is unique in the fact that it produced two song cycles by two significant composers where they composed cycles for the same project and the same artist. The project was this movie *Adventures of Don Quixote*, the composers were Maurice Ravel and Jacque Ibert and the artist was Feodor Chaliapin. This movie presents a rare opportunity to see and hear one of Opera's great basses of the early 20th century perform. Chaliapin sang live in the movie and did not lip-sync.

Chaliapin

Feodor Chaliapin is considered one of the great lyrical basses of all times. Born in 1873 near Kazan and died in Paris in 1938. Chaliapin was largely untaught until he began singing with a traveling Russian Opera company. In Tbilisi, he studied with D. A. Usatov. His career then took him to sing with many of the major Russian Opera companies. One of his more noted roles was that of *Ivan the Terrible* in "The Maid of Pskov" by Rimsky-Korsakov. He made his international opera debut at La Scala in 1901 in title role of Boito's opera "Mefistofele" and in 1907 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York with the same role. Chaliapin's voice was sufficiently flexible enough to sing Baritone roles as well. This is significant in that both of these song cycles written for the film are considered standard parts of the Baritone repertoire. He not only possessed a wide range, but he was noted for his vocal declamation in realizing the relationship between the words and the music. Chaliapin went to great lengths to prepare for a role. He would not only read historical literature on the character, but he would also visit museums and galleries to see related art on the subject. As in his role of *Ivan the Terrible* in "the Maid of Pskov", he studied various portraits of the Tsar and would make sketches of the character before applying his make-up. Because of his extensive role preparations, Chaliapin was able to psychologically think himself the character. This ability was so admired in his stage performances that it influenced the Great Russian producer Konstantin Stanislavsky who based his own theories of acting on performances of Chaliapin. (7, 3)

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The History

The subject of Don Quixote has fascinated artist and film makers for a long time. There have been numerous films made over the last century beginning with one in 1916 produced by D. W. Griffith. Our story has several other important characters aside from the composers themselves. We begin with comments from the film editor, Jean Oser. He states that the project was conceived by a Greek financier in London who wanted a multilingual film directed by either Charles Chaplin or Jean de Lemur and the music composed by Maurice Ravel. The project was poorly organized and on the verge of collapse when G. W. Pabst, who had traveled to France on business, was asked to take over as director. Pabst had recently come from a successful film "The Mistress of Atlantis" and he too had envisioned a Don Quixote film as a future project. When Pabst agreed to join the film, it was already in trouble. He brought with him his own scenarist, Alexander Arnoux, set designer, Andrei Andreiev and editor, Jean Oser. (10,1) Originally the producers of the film wanted to have Ravel write the music for the film because he was internationally recognized as one of Europe's foremost composers and had a proven interest in the Spanish music. Likewise they wanted Paul Morand, well known as a versatile author, skilled diplomat and world traveler, as the writer. Together their names would help influence sponsors for the film. (9) Ravel was apparently only one of several composers who had been asked to compose music for the film. Others include Milhaud, Marcel Delannoy and Jacque Ibert. Exactly what the circumstances were and what the composers were told is unclear. According to Rollo Myers, none of the composers had reason to suspect that anyone else had been asked to compose music for the film. (6) Ravel had suffered health problems as early as 1919. He began work on three songs using the poems of Paul Morand. He was late in completing the songs and the commission was given to Jacque Ibert. It is unclear if the commission was given to Ibert because Ravel was late in finishing the songs, the producers or Pabst preferred the Ibert songs or if Chaliapin gave a preference to the Ibert songs.

One scenario is that Ravel himself passed the commission to Ibert when he realized that he would be unable to complete the songs in time for the film. It seems that Ravel sued the film company but if so, nothing came of it. (4) Ravel's songs were originally for voice and piano and were later orchestrated. Although his songs were not used in the film, they have become some of the most performed songs in the Baritone repertoire. Ravel gave the manuscripts to a young French baritone named Martial Singher. Singher was unable to work on the songs right away and returned them to the publisher. Soon after, he was called upon to record the songs with orchestra before their publication. Ravel was present at the recording session and made several comments regarding wrong notes, tempi and dynamics for both the orchestra and the voice. One example is an unwritten *ritardando* in the Chanson Romanesque on the words "dessous le" and again on the words "vous benis". The song is characteristic of the Spanish quajira and was originally called Chanson romantique but was changed before publishing. Ravel asked Singher to choose his favorite song and that he would dedicate it to him. Singher chose Chanson épique to which Ravel replied he had chosen the right one. The third song in the cycle is the "Chanson à boire" written in a lively triple meter of the Spanish Jota. The songs were introduced in December 1934 as Paul Parey conducted the Colonne Orchestra with Martial Singher singing. The critics were very impressed with Ravel's songs all the while not knowing that these were the last notes that the composer would write. (9) Ibert composed four songs sung by Chaliapin for the film: "Chanson du départ", "Chanson à Dulcinée", "Chanson du Duc" and "Chanson de la mort". The first song is a setting of a poem by Ronsard and the other three are on poems by Alexandre Arnoux. The second song was not used in the film versions that I saw. You can listen to the "Chanson à Dulcinée" on recordings of Chaliapin including some on YouTube. The first three songs all use a strophic form with the first two having meter changes. The final song is very short and in a somber and reflective style with an accompaniment that suggest a somewhat strophic composition. Ibert also composed the background music for the film as well as a character song for Don Quixote's companion, Sancho, titled "Ah quelle belle vie" (Chanson de Sancho).

The Movie

Both the Video and the DVD contain the English and the French versions of the movie. There was also a German version made. The movie is a shortened version of the Don Quixote story by Cervantes with some changes made to the plot. Arnoux along with Morand were the writers that adapted the script from Cervantes novel. All versions had a mostly different cast with the exception of Chaliapin who stars as Don Quixote in all of the versions. Each of these versions last about an hour. The original film was about 73 minutes. Unfortunately the version available has been shortened to about an hour. This may explain why the second song of Ibert's cycle (Chanson à Dulcinée) does not appear in the movie. The opening song for Chaliapin is titled "Sierra Nevada" composed by Dargomyzhsky. It is a very lively song which shows off Chaliapin's upper register.

The Ibert songs for the most part have a more somber mood. Chaliapin seems to be in better voice in the French version and his French diction also flows smoother than that of his English. Both the English and the French versions have sub-titles. The English is a bit awkward for Chaliapin and the words do not seem to fit within the music as well as the original French words. Known for his acting, Chaliapin gives a very convincing performance as Don Quixote and with his large stature, towers over the rest of the cast. He is able to easily negotiate the tessitura of the songs even though they lie predominantly in a Baritone range. During some of the singing, the scene breaks away to another scene with songs continuing and the singing becomes a bit too faint. Sancho offers a wonderful comic relief against Don Quixote's serious delusions. Unfortunately, critics were not too kind. One New York times review pointed to a less than dramatic ending, out of fashion chivalry and a loose structure of the plot. Another critic from the Variety Film Review, praises, Pabst recreating Cervantes' 300 year old character but states that the plot is weak with only a series of incidents without suspense.(8, 13) Despite its shortcomings, this movie offers a unique history by creating two mainstays of our repertoire and more importantly, a rare opportunity to observe a true opera legend.

Notes

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